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ABSTRACT

The development, testing, introduction, evaluation, and refinement of a user interface for a statewide, multi-library online public access catalog network can be a very involved and politically complex enterprise. A multitude of perspectives, assumptions, preferences, and needs accompanies the multitude of players involved, i.e., library administrators, personnel, and users from a range of library types. As a user interface is being created, system designers should take into account user needs and the political climate within which the system will operate, in addition to considering the operating system and telecommunications requirements. Online network systems must be developed through three-way interaction among users, library staff, and the systems designer, not simply by the designer for the librarians. To approach political difficulties arising from varying interests of different libraries participating in the network, a system-wide board of directors or council of librarians should be established, representing all types and sizes of libraries. The loss of autonomy and some of the attributes of a single library online catalog, with its unique interface, can be offset by the advantages of a comprehensive multi-library online catalog network and generalized interface, which should accomplish the goal of meeting the users' information needs. (SD)

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EVERYONE WANTS ONE... A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT ONE: THE PROCESS OF INTRODUCING A USER INTERFACE SYSTEM INTO AN ONLINE PUBLIC ACCESS CATALOG NETWORK

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EVERYONE WANTS ONE... A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT ONE: THE PROCESS OF INTRODUCING A USER INTERFACE SYSTEM INTO AN ONLINE PUBLIC ACCESS CATALOG NETWORK

If done correctly, the development, testing, introduction, evaluation, and refinement of a user interface component for a library's online public access catalog is a time-consuming and detailed activity. We have seen demonstrated and heard described some good examples of interfaces at this meeting. But the development, testing, introduction, evaluation, and refinement of a user interface for a statewide, multi-library online catalog network can be a very involved and politically-complex interprise. Why? Because of the multitude and range of players involved. And with these players come a multitude of perspectives, assumptions, preferences, and needs.

It has been said that when you get five reference librarians together, you'll get a minimum of six opinions. When you get five information systems designers together, you'll get at least ten opinions, but when you get five library users together, there's no limit to the number of opinions that will spill forth. Simply put, they want it all!

With this multitude of perspectives, assumptions, preferences, and needs evident, it is not surprising that everyone (and by everyone, I mean library users, library staffs, and library administrators) want a user interface, but everyone wants a slightly different interface.

So, what are some of the elements that need to be taken into account as a user interface is being created? We know that the development of an interface has several technical steps, involving operating system software requirements, telecommunications

requirements, etc., but all too often, two very necessary examinations are not considered early enough. First, the users' needs, and second, the political climate within which the interface and the overall system will operate. Let me deal with each of these influences or forces separately.

First, concerning the users' needs, some systems designers contend that since the library user is moving from a printed card, paper index environment to an online environment, he doesn't have the necessary sophistication and appreciation of the capabilities and complexities of the online system in order to enable him to really know what he wants and needs. Therefore, the designer should create the interface and give it to the user. I'll admit that the user does not, never will, and never care to appreciate fully the complexities of how an information retrieval system works, but the user can provide the systems designer with a perspective that is needed.

I know that we are (or should be) encouraged that this solely "top-down" development is changing in more instances and that the user is being brought into the development cycle earlier than ever before. During his presentation, "Evaluating Library System Interfaces for Library Staffs and Users," yesterday [May 22, 1989], Larry Woods emphasized that library users should be invited/encouraged/cajoled to attend and participate in a demonstration of a user interface being considered by a library. We keep hearing at this meeting and elsewhere that systems should not be developed by designers for librarians. We should keep saying it and keep hearing it, because in too many instances, this is still the case. We still have a long way to go...

The solicitation of user input and reaction is even more complex when a statewide, multi-library type system is involved. You may find users coming from large academic or special research libraries, from junior/community college libraries, senior citizens from public libraries, third graders from school libraries. How can an interface satisfy everyone? Well, it can't. However, I contend that we can do a better job of sitting with the patron on the other side of the terminal (on the front side), of spending more time and energy in this dialogue, of listening to and hearing the user before we rush out and create an interface, then after the fact, merely asking the user how the HELP screen should be formatted.

Let me move to the second influence or force in developing a user interface for a multi-library network, that of recognizing, appreciating, and responding to the real political climate that exists among the libraries involved. I'll again use the earlier example of the large academic or special research library, the junior/community college library, the public library, the school library. Just as with library users, these different types of libraries come with different perceptions, assumptions, preferences, and needs--different missions.

The actual active involvement or perception of active involvement by library staff members and library administrators from all types of libraries in the development of the system and interface is vital.

It is difficult enough to merge bibliographic records with far different levels of name and subject authority control from all types and sizes of libraries into a single, system-wide database, to construct the necessary indexing files, and to establish a mechanism for record maintenance and revision. What one wants to avoid is a situation in which different groups or factions of librarians,

especially library administrators, question the amount of input and the degree of influence that their types of libraries are having in the decision-making process. What is felt and perceived by library administrators is echoed by many library staff members, college/university presidents, and library boards.

A system-wide board of directors or council of librarians with representation assured from all types and sizes of libraries should be established.

A user interface for a multi-library system should be so constructed that a wide range of users with varying levels of library experience will find the interface as useful and as relevant as possible. Here is another example where a three-way interaction between library user, reference librarian, and systems designer should take place.

I've said earlier that the library user wants everything, every possible capability and feature in a user interface. Furthermore, the user wanted it yesterday. The systems designer is therefore faced with conflicting pressures--develop an interface as complete as possible and as quickly as possible, while at the same time respond to the need for enhancements and improvements to the overall online catalog itself. We have to remind ourselves for whom the online catalog exists and devote as much designer and programming time as possible to the interface.

In conclusion, the overall interprise of developing and installing an online catalog with user interface is complex and expensive enough that what is needed is as unified a voice as possible to reassure the holders of the purse strings that the multi-library online catalog is the right thing to do in order to benefit all of the library users.

That the loss of autonomy and the loss of some of the attributes of a single library online catalog with its unique interface will be offset by the advantages of a comprehensive, multi-library online catalog network and generalized interface--all of which are designed to do one thing--help to meet the information needs of the user.